

Texas A&M President Resigns Amid Fallout Over Journalism Program

The university said M. Katherine Banks would retire “immediately” after political pushback over the effort to appoint Kathleen McElroy to lead its journalism program.

By Nicholas Bogel-Burroughs and Remy Tumin

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Texas A&M University said on Friday that its president was resigning “immediately” following a conflict over the school’s shifting offers to a candidate who appeared set to lead its journalism school but ultimately declined the position after facing pushback over her work promoting diversity.

The president, M. Katherine Banks, submitted a letter of retirement late on Thursday, in which she said that the negative attention over the journalism director, Kathleen McElroy, was a distraction for Texas A&M, one of the largest universities in the country.

Dr. Banks’s resignation came days after the resignation of the dean overseeing the university’s College of Arts and Sciences and followed a tense meeting between Dr. Banks and the university’s faculty senate on Wednesday.

During that meeting, Dr. Banks, who had been president for just over two years, said she was sorry that Dr. McElroy would not be joining the university and said she was embarrassed by how the situation had been handled. But she also suggested that she knew little about the details of what had led to the shifting offers made to Dr. McElroy, a former New York Times editor and professor of journalism at the University of Texas.

That version of events was challenged on Friday by Hart Blanton, a professor who leads the university's communication and journalism department. He said Dr. Banks had actually “injected herself into the process atypically and early on” and that she had misled the faculty senate about her role.

Dr. Blanton said it appeared more scrutiny had been given to Dr. McElroy's hire because she is Black, and also said someone had altered a draft of a job offer letter — changing the offer of a multiyear term to one year — and sent it to Dr. McElroy without his knowledge, even though it still included his signature. He said he had shared materials related to the failed hiring with university lawyers on Thursday and was pleased to see that Dr. Banks had resigned.

The debacle over Dr. McElroy's appointment is the latest clash at the intersection of higher education, diversity and politics. Gov. Greg Abbott of Texas, a Republican, signed a bill this year that will ban offices and programs at publicly funded colleges whose purpose is to promote “diversity, equity and inclusion.”

And in Florida, in May, Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis signed legislation that largely banned state colleges from spending money on diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives, and forbade the teaching of “identity politics” in some required courses.

The dispute also follows the failed appointment of another journalist affiliated with The Times, Nikole Hannah-Jones, in 2021 at the University of North Carolina. The university's board of trustees refused to grant her tenure after she was appointed to be chair in race and investigative journalism. The refusal followed criticism, much of it from conservatives, of Ms. Hannah-Jones's involvement in The Times's 1619 Project, which argued that 1619 — the year that a group of enslaved Africans was brought to the United States — was as important to America's history as the year 1776. Ms. Hannah-Jones later became the chair of race and journalism at Howard University.

In the Texas A&M case, Dr. McElroy said that the university had promised her a five-year contract but that she was ultimately offered a one-year agreement after complaints from an alumni group and a conservative publication over her work promoting diversity, including an opinion column she wrote in which she said it was important to hire more nonwhite faculty members.

Dr. McElroy covered a range of topics during her decades in journalism — from sports to dining — and said in a previous interview with The Times that diversity efforts were a small part of her journalism and academic careers.

A 1981 A&M graduate, Dr. McElroy ultimately turned down the one-year contract with the school, she said, and the episode became a full-blown crisis for the university after The Texas Tribune first reported on the conflict. Dr. McElroy described a series of conversations in which the dean of A&M's College of Arts and Sciences told her that there was political pushback to her appointment.

"I said, 'What's wrong?'" Dr. McElroy recalled of her conversation with the dean, José Luis Bermúdez. "He said, 'You're a Black woman who was at The New York Times and, to these folks, that's like working for Pravda.'"

In a statement on Friday, Dr. McElroy said she was "deeply grateful for the groundswell of support I've received, especially from Aggies of all majors, and my former and current students." She added that she would comment further in the future. "There's much more I could say and will say about what has unfolded," she said.

The collision of academia and politics played out at an institution at the heart of Texas identity and culture. With nearly 75,000 students, Texas A&M, in College Station, about 95 miles northwest of Houston, is the state's other leviathan of higher education — the more rural, more conservative rival to the University of Texas at Austin. It is a university determined to be considered among the world-class research institutions while also intensely focused on its traditions and its beginnings as a school made up of students from farming towns, which then sent them on to the military.

The school is known for the fervent loyalty of its graduates. And even by Texas standards, it is defined by a celebration of the state and big-time sports, especially Aggie football. Black students make up a disproportionately small percentage of both Texas A&M (2 percent) and the University of Texas at Austin (5 percent), when compared with the state as a whole (13.4 percent) or the cities where the universities are located.

What remained a mystery even after Dr. Banks's resignation was exactly why the university had altered its offer to Dr. McElroy. One conservative alumni group, the Rudder Association, had emailed A&M leadership after her appointment was announced and said in a statement that A&M should avoid "the divisive ideology of identity politics." On Friday, the group's president, Matt Poling, said he appreciated Dr. Banks's service to the university.

At the faculty senate meeting on Wednesday, professors had sharply criticized the university's bungling of Dr. McElroy's appointment, with some saying that criticism over Dr. McElroy's work to promote diversity should not have factored into her hiring.

“What is not OK is that the university is presumed to have gone back on a contract, and what is even more not OK is the perception that the reason that the initial contract did not go through was not because of merit, but rather because of the opinions or demographics of the candidate,” said Tracy Anne Hammond, a computer science professor and the speaker of the faculty senate. She added: “Right now, the faculty and the world has lost trust in Texas A&M University, and that is a huge problem.”

Dr. Banks described a breakdown in communication in the process of trying to hire Dr. McElroy but said the university had stood by the offers it had made to her.

“Based on what I understood, at all points in this process, she was coming here,” Dr. Banks said, adding that she still wanted Dr. McElroy to join the university.

But she faced tough questions from faculty members, many of whom criticized what they said was political meddling in the university’s hiring process and an embarrassing sequence of events.

“Apparently, no one knows who made the offer, no one knows how many offers were made, nobody knows who signed which offer, and nobody knows who read or wrote those offers,” said Raymundo Arróyave, an engineering professor. “Frankly, we look incompetent.”

N.K. Anand, the vice president for faculty affairs, said at the meeting that the first offer letter to Dr. McElroy had been for a tenured position and that a second offer letter — for a one-year directorship and three-year faculty role — was signed by the department head only. He said the university had been unable to locate any five-year offer letter.

The faculty senate passed a resolution to create a fact-finding committee to look into how Dr. McElroy’s hiring was handled. University system officials said on Friday they were in the early stages of an investigation of what went wrong, “We are determined to get to the bottom of what happened and why, learn from the mistakes and do better in the future,” a spokesman for the university system said in a statement.

In another statement on Friday, Chancellor John Sharp said that Mark A. Welsh III, dean of the university’s government and public service school, would take over as president on an interim basis.

Stephanie Saul and Rick Rojas contributed reporting.

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